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MYTHOLOGICAL RELATIONS BETWEEN THE ''LAVANDEIRA'' BIRDS *FLUVICOLA NENGETA* AND *MOTACILLA ALBA* IN NORTHEAST BRAZIL AND NORTHWEST SPAIN: POSSIBLE CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS FOR CONSERVATION

Gilmar Beserra de Farias, Ângelo Giuseppe Chaves Alves and José Geraldo Wanderley Marques

The bird species Fluvicola nengeta *(Tyrannidae) and* Motacilla alba *(Motacilidae) are widely known as* lavandeiras *and are directly associated with mythological traditions in Europe and South America.* F. nengeta *is considered a sacred animal in popular Brazilian Catholicism. We investigated the possible implications of mythical beliefs for ethnoconservation of these species. Two versions of the* lavandeira *myth were examined–a South American tradition common in north and northeastern Brazil, and a European version known principally from Galicia, Spain. Each version of the myth was divided into small component units called mythemes, which were subsequently analyzed and compared. The two bird species have similar morphological and behavioral characteristics that probably aided the ''migration'' of the European mythology to the Americas–showing that human populations that are geographically distant but culturally linked and that interact with very similar natural elements will demonstrate similar cognitive schemes. The analysis of myths represents an appropriate strategy for ethnoecological studies and for ethnoconservation efforts, especially when related to species falling under an ideologically motivated protection such as the* lavandeira *birds.*

Key words: Fluvicola nengeta, Motacilla alba, *lavandeira, myth, ethnoconservation*

As espécies de aves Fluvicola nengeta *(Tyrannidae) e* Motacilla alba *(Motacilidae) são geralmente conhecidas pelo nome vernáculo lavandeira e são diretamente associadas ao pensamento mítico na Europa e na América do Sul.* F. nengeta *é considerado como animal sagrado no catolicismo popular brasileiro. Investigam-se neste artigo as possíveis implicações do pensamento mítico para a etnoconservação das espécies em questão. Neste artigo, foram utilizadas duas versões do mito da lavandeira, uma sul-americana, comum no norte e nordeste do Brasil, e outra conhecida na Europa, principalmente na Galícia (Espanha). Cada versão do mito foi dividida em pequenas unidades constitutivas denominadas mitemas e posteriormente comparadas. As aves lavandeiras das duas espécies em questão apresentaram aspectos morfológicos e de comportamento muito semelhantes, e isto pode ter auxiliado numa possível ''migração'' do mito europeu para o continente sul-americano, mostrando que populações humanas geograficamente distantes, mas culturalmente interligadas e convivendo com elementos naturais parecidos, podem apresentar esquemas cognitivos semelhantes. A análise de mitos é uma ferramenta adequada para o aprofundamento de estudos etnoecológicos e para subsidiar os esforços de etnoconservação, especialmente quando relacionados a espécies passíveis de proteção ideologicamente motivada, como é o caso das aves lavandeiras.*

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Introduction

Oral traditions contain myths that can influence humans' symbolic and behavioral relationships with other animals. This can be seen in peoples' attitudes toward and myths about the birds *Fluvicola nengeta* and *Motacilla alba*, popularly known as *lavandeira* in Brazil and northwest Spain. There is a rich mythology regarding these birds in several cultures in different regions of South America and Europe. These myths associate women laundering clothing with birds locally known as *lavandeiras,* which are normally found near aquatic environments. In Galician and Portuguese idioms, the term *lavandeira* generally refers to both women who work as laundresses as well as to the birds *M. alba* and *F. nengeta*. In Brazilian colloquial speech, *lavadeira* and *lavandeira* are used interchangeably to refer to both the birds and laundresses. The term *lavandeira* is used in this paper to refer to *Motacilla alba* and *Fluvicola nengeta* in Galician and Portuguese-speaking contexts (mainly Galicia and northeast Brazil). The analogous Spanish (not Galician) term is *lavandera*. Wagtail is used here to refer specifically to birds of the genus *Motacilla* in other contexts. To avoid confusion, the terms *lavadeira, lavandeira, lavadera* and *lavandera*, are used in this paper to refer only to birds (not to people), except when explicitly indicated. Laundry workers are called ''laundresses,'' while ''washerwoman'' refers to the mythic female figure who is said to appear washing bloody clothes at night. We use structural analysis (following Lévi-Strauss) to examine the *lavandeiras* myths in Galicia and Brazil and explore the cultural relationships between the birds and people, the myths' role in the conservation of these birds, as well as the cultural connections between Europe and South America.

According to Barrera-Bassols and Toledo (2005), ethnoecology focuses on studies of knowledge (*corpus*) and beliefs (*kosmos)* that serve as foundations for productive behaviors and practices (*praxis*) among human populations. Marques (2005b) considers religious beliefs as one component of *kosmos* and examines the processes of acquisition and inclusion of faunal elements in the popular Brazilian Catholic tradition. This can be observed in folk tales involving mammals such as the armadillo (Lopes Neto 2006), hymenopteran insects such as the ''devil's-horse'' (Lenko and Papavero 1996), and tyrant birds such as the *lavandeiras* (Cascudo 1999).

The term ethnoconservation refers to the actions or practices of indigenous groups or small societies intended to prevent or mitigate resource depletion, species extirpation, or habitat degradation (Smith and Wishnie 2000). According to Diegues (1999), the study of ethnoconservation can involve professionals from diverse disciplines in the natural sciences, members of local populations, and NGOs with the objective of effectively conserving landscapes, biodiversity, and socio-cultural diversity. This socio-cultural diversity can be expressed in many ways, in relation to the ''divine,'' to the history of a group, or to knowledge concerning natural elements. Although ethnoconservation is typically considered in relation to small-scale societies, in our opinion, this concept can be extended to larger and more complex social contexts in certain cases, as we do in this analysis of *lavandeira* myths.

Myths are important not only for their role as elements within an oral tradition integrated into the cultural heritage of a given society, but also for playing a role in mediating human conduct with natural elements and modifying the relationships between culture and nature (Eliade 2004). Myths tell a story, a sacred narrative, a sequence of events whose importance lies in those happenings themselves as well as in the details of the narrative (Lévi-Strauss 2003). In other words, myths are a representation of the worldview in any culture. Mythical thought is constructed through the elaboration of hypotheses (e.g., ''what if the world isn't just all we can see?'') that gain a concrete dimension through rituals in everyday life (Armstrong 2005).

The idea of examining the origin of myths has generally been abandoned by those engaged in cultural studies. Instead, researchers have found it more useful to study the nature of myths to understand each within its cultural context (Ramos 1951). Following this reasoning, the present work analyzes the myths of the *lavandeira* birds as a way of reflecting on the existence, cosmology, and the social relationships extant in each culture (Rocha 1985), as well as to investigate the possibility of the myths' role in the ethnoconservation of these birds.

The many versions of any legend make their study more complex, and any analysis must take into account the full spectrum of variations (Lévi-Strauss 2003). Our analysis of *lavandeira* myths is intended to lead the reader to the realm of possibilities, instead of certainties (Leach 1977). In this context, the present work has two specific objectives: 1) to compare the *lavandeira* birds of northeastern Brazil (*F. nengeta*) with those of northwest Spain (*M. alba*) in terms of their morphological and behavioral characteristics, and 2) to examine the mythological bases of social taboos that regulate the relationships between these birds and humans, as well as the implications for the ethnoconservation of these birds.

The *Lavandeiras* Myths in Northeast Brazil and Northwest Spain

Two versions of the *lavandeira* bird myth were examined, one from northeastern Brazil, and the other from Galicia, Spain. Each version of the myth was divided into smaller constituent units called mythemes, which were compared using horizontal (diachronic) and vertical (synchronic) analyses (Lévi-Strauss 2003).

The *Lavandeira* Birds

The first myth involves *Fluvicola nengeta* (*lavandeira-of-our-lady* or simply *lavandeira*) in the Tyrannidae family. Its binomial derives from the Latin *fluvius* (= river or stream + *cola* = inhabitant) and the bird's Amerindian Tupi name (***guiraru nheengeta***), which means 'inhabitant of the water' (Frisch and Frisch 2005; Jobling 1995). This species is common along river banks or open areas near water bodies, principally in eastern Brazil (Sick 1997) and Ecuador (Ridgely and Tudor 1994). Its coloration is predominantly black and white (Figure 1A). *F. nengeta* forages on the ground (Fitzpatrick 1980), constructs its nests on tree branches that hang over the water (Pacheco and Simon 1995), and performs short runs and flights, often standing with its head inclined upwards and its tail

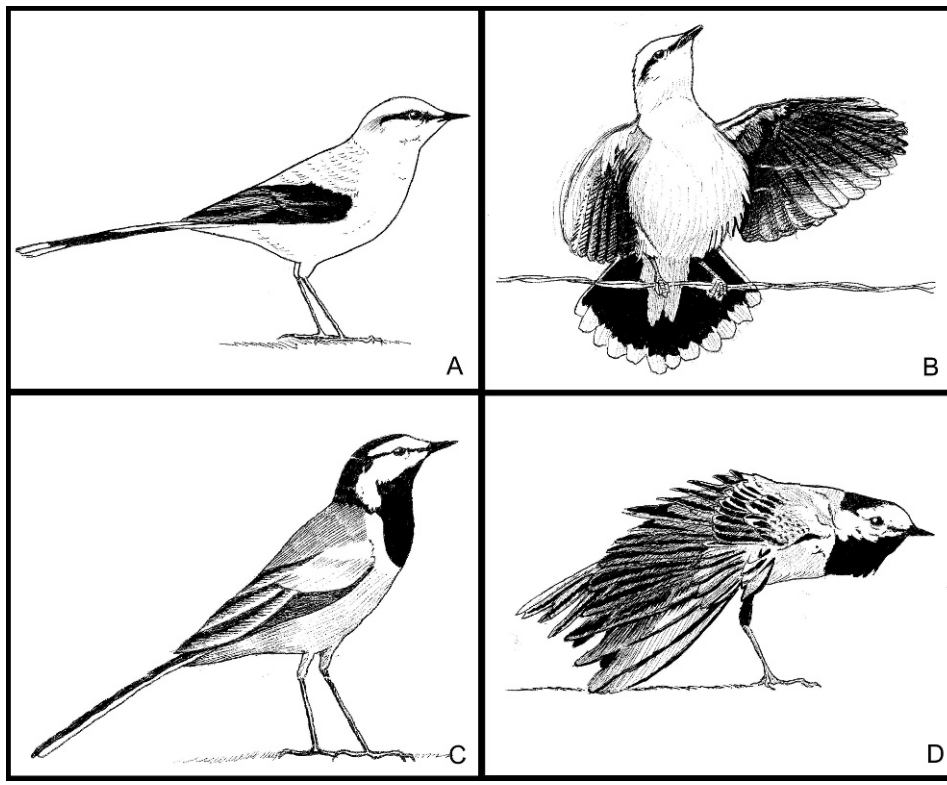

Figure 1. (A) *Fluvicola nengeta*, adapted from www.justbirds.org; (B) *F. nengeta* ruffling its feathers, adapted from Sibley (2000); (C) *Motacilla alba*, adapted from www.ownbyphotography.com; (D) *M. alba* ruffling its feathers, adapted from www.behav.org.

fanned out, showing the black underside of its wings (Farias and Mendes 1994). In Brazil, other tyrant species share the same common name or derivatives of this name: *F. albiventer* (*lavandeira*) (Marques 2005a), *Arundinicola leucocephala* (*lavadeira*) (Vieira 1936), and *Xolmis* sp. (*lavadeira-branca*) (Zenaide 1953). This article focuses on the myths related to *F. nengeta*, as it is the most commonly observed species and the most cited in the literature in terms of its mythological connections and possible ethnoconservation implications.

Myth 2 focuses on *Motacilla alba* in the Motacilidae family. Its generic name signifies 'movement with the tail' (Jobling 1995), which along with its common English name 'wagtail', refers to its characteristic habit of constantly moving its tail. Its plumage is primarily black and white with a bit of gray (Figure 1C) and the specific epithet *alba* probably refers to its pure white lower chest. *M. alba* inhabits open fields and river borders throughout Europe, Asia, Africa (Hermann et al. 1999), and in restricted areas of North America (Sibley 2000). In Spain, there are slightly more than 30 common names for *M. alba* (Mondéjar 1991), among them *lavandera-blanca*, *andarríos* and *aguzanieves.* Two other species have more specific regional names: *lavandera-boyera* (*M. flava*) and *lavandera-cascadeña* (*M. cinerea*; Carro 1971). But mythical associations made between *lavandeira* birds and

Table 1. Mythemes from the two versions of the *lavandeiras* myth.

	Actions	Behavior	Prohibitions	Penalties	Ethnoconservation
Myth 1	The *lavandeira* bird washed the clothes of Our Lady or of the Christ Child.	The *lavandeira* bird (*F. nengeta*) sings with its wings open, stretches and shakes its body, and moves its tail in imitation of the techniques used by laundresses in the rivers.	One should not molest, capture, raise, or kill these birds.	It offends Our Lady; One can become crazy, be badly viewed by the community; can bring drought to the region.	Tendency towards ethnoconservation of *F. nengeta*.
Myth 2	The *lavandeira nocturna* (a woman laundering at night) washed and wrung out the clothes and invited passersby to do the same.	The *lavandeira* bird (*M. alba*) imitates the movements that laundresses perform while washing clothes, with the flexing of its tail.	One should not wring the clothes in the same direction as the washerwoman.	One can be lost to the devil.	Tendency towards ethnoconservation of *M. alba*.

the devil seem to be more directly related to *M. alba* (Bouza-Brey 1942; Mondéjar 1991), which is the most widely known and distributed of these species.

Myth 1: *Lavandeira* (of Our Lady)

In northern and northeastern Brazil, the bird called *lavandeira* was given its name because it had supposedly washed the clothes of the Christ Child or of his mother (Our Lady in the Catholic tradition). In accordance with this belief, one must not capture, raise, kill, or eat the *lavandeira*, as that would offend Our Lady. To do so would be to risk financial ruin, insanity, loss of community respect, or decreased regional rainfall among other misfortunes (Marques 2005a). No one should touch this bird, especially when it is in the river, on the rocks, or ruffling its wings, because during these moments it is washing the clothes of Our Lady. Brazilian anthropologist Luís da Câmara Cascudo recounted part of the myth. He wrote: ''It sings with its wing open, increasing the cadence of its incessant call and vibrating its small body… and it is during this song that her black and gracious tail imitates the [movements of the] laundresses in the rivers'' (Cascudo 2006:146; Table 1).

Myth 2: *Lavandeira* (of the devil)

The myth of the *lavandeira* bird is widely diffused in Galicia, as there is an association between this bird and nocturnal washerwomen (witches or demonic beings, locally named *lavandeiras nocturnas*) who invite passersby to help wring the clothes they have washed in rivers or fountains (Table 1). Therefore, whoever might pass a place where these spirits appear should sing to overcome their fear (Bouza-Brey 1942). In Spain, the *lavandeira* bird (*M. alba*) is often seen near water-mill dams, hopping around laundresses in a friendly fashion and seeming to imitate by the wagging of its tail the women's movements while beating their clothes (Mondéjar 1991).

Comparison of the Brazilian and Spanish Versions of the Myth

Horizontal analysis of the two versions of the myth resulted in very similar findings (Table 1). In both cases there is a woman (whether washerwoman or laundress) mediating relationships between the natural world (rivers and birds) and the cultural world (washing clothes). In the two versions of this myth, the birds associated with these oral traditions belong to different families and their geographical distributions do not overlap, but the analysis indicates that the two versions suffered only small transformations that still retain a single theme: a trend towards the ethnoconservation of the *lavandeira* birds

A synchronic interpretation of these myths indicates a binary opposition between the mythemes in terms of the act of washing clothes. This action could be linked to Our Lady (a Catholic symbol of pureness and chastity) or to the devil (who is believed to be the personification of evil in popular Catholicism in Brazil and the Iberian Peninsula); this opposition reminds us of the eternal war between good and evil. Marques (2005a:37) describes this binary opposition as occurring because world views influenced by popular Catholicism create an antagonistic position between ''the animals that are part of God'' and those that ''have part of evilness.''

In Europe, there are a number of variations on the *lavandeiras* myth in which laundresses appear linked to demonic entities. In Galicia, certain folk songs draw parallels between the devil and the woman who washes clothes (Bouza-Brey 1942), or tell of apparitions of women washing bloody clothes near the rivers at night (Alberro 2004). The lyrics of one of these songs reads: ''Meniña, ti es o demo que me andas atentando; que no río que na fonte sempre te encontro lavando'' (Cerqueiro 2002:85). We translate it as: ''Girl, you are the devil that tempts me; for I meet you at the river and meet you at the fountain laundering.''

Bouza-Brey (1942), Cerqueiro (2002), and Alberro (2004) considered the respect that Galicians demonstrate for the *lavandeira* birds *M. alba* to be related to a fear of these night visions. In the province of A Corunha, Galicia, washerwomen are thought to be in the service of a devil doing evil deeds at rivers near crossroads. This supernatural creature has the face of a women and the body of a dragon. Its countenance is capable of seducing men, while its green body would be imperceptible in the dark of the night. Those invited by this vision to wash clothes in the river should never wring them out in the same direction as the washerwoman, under penalty of being handed over to the devil (Rodríguez 2001).

Galicia shares a common Celtic cultural heritage with other regions of Europe such as Ireland, Scotland, and Brittany (Alberro 2004; Keating 1990). The image of a mythic nocturnal female figure is well known in many regions influenced by the Celtic culture and is known as the ''washer woman at the ford'' in English; ***bean nighe*** in Scottish Gaelic; ***tunnerez noz*** in Breton; *lavandière* in French; and '*lavandeira*' in Galician idiom (Alberro 2004; Mackillop 2006; Varandas 2006). In Ireland and Scotland, seeing the apparition of a washer-woman laundering bloody clothes (in addition to the armor and weapons of a knight) is considered a death omen (Ardagh 2006; MacKillop 2006). In this context, there seems to be a cultural link between the woman who appears washing clothes at night and the Celtic divinity Banshee. According to MacKillop (2006), these ''evil personalities'' aided the institutional forces of early Christianity to ''demonize'' the Celtic cultural inheritance. The different variations of these myths reveal a common cosmology that establishes a relationship between the human and the supernatural worlds and reinforces a belief that there are socially-based rules and that to break them is to subject oneself to penalties.

In an analogous manner, birds have a role in mediating connections between humans and the spirit world in many South American societies. The indigenous oral tradition of the Kayapó Amerindians of Brazil holds that a large bird sent the first human illness to punish humankind for not respecting animals (Banner 1957). This tradition suggests that illnesses are provoked by cosmic energetic disequilibria between people and animal spirits (Posey and Elisabetsky 1991). For the Yagán and Mapuche indigenous tribes in Chile and Argentina, people and birds have a common origin. A study undertaken in the Pantanal (Mato Grosso, Brazil) likewise revealed a similar cosmology, as most birds had some attached symbolic affinity permeating the relationships between human culture and nature (Oliveira Júnior 2005). These examples indicate a shared cosmology among many of the native residents of South America (Rozzi 2004).

Popular Catholicism and Ethnoconservation

Among the many narratives associated with animals in Brazilian popular Catholicism is the story of the ''flight to Egypt,'' which is cited in modified versions by several authors (e.g., Lopes Neto 2006) and includes many animal species from the Neotropical ecozone. Within this context, the Brazilian folk belief that *lavandeira* birds helped the Virgin Mary wash the clothes of the Christ Child is indicated as the justification for the popular name *lavandeira-of-our-lady* applied to these members of the Tyrannidae family and also the cultural tendency to protect this bird: ''who ever kills (*this bird*) offends the Virgin Mary'' (Cascudo 1999:508). Marques (2005b) suggested that the myth that gave rise to this taboo is an example of a *meme* that could serve to protect biodiversity. According to Brodie (1996:32) ''a meme is a unit of information in a mind whose existence influences events such that more copies of itself get created in other minds.'' As such, beliefs and practices associated with Brazilian folk Catholicism may result in the cultural protection of the *lavandeira* bird *F. nengeta* (one should not touch, hunt, kill or eat them). However, Marques (2005b) observed that a sacred status alone is not sufficient to ensure effective ethnoconservation, as it is applied to many animals, such as the bird *rolinha fogo-pagô* (*Scardafella squamata*), the armadillo *tatu-mulita* (*Dasypus* sp.), and the opossum *gambá* (*Didelphis* spp.). These animals have been positively linked to the Sacred Family during their flight to Egypt but are, nonetheless, frequently captured and eaten. As such, it will be necessary to empirically investigate the protective effects of these *memes* and examine their influence on the population dynamics of these species (Marques 2005b).

The marked presence of these animals in mythology is one of the elements that culturally link the Iberian Peninsula and northeastern Brazil, as demonstrated by the data presented here concerning the *lavandeira* birds. Marques (2005b) compiled similar data in relation to the *solha* (a pleuronectiform fish), with emphasis in this case on the mythological portrayals in both Bahia (Brazil) and in Portugal concerning the buccal asymmetry of these fish. Marques (2005b) also observed that there may be a Portuguese origin to the notion that killing certain birds could constitute a sin, and gave the example of the cultural prohibition (one should not kill them) conferred on swallows (Hirundinidae) in traditional Portuguese Catholicism. In another context, Thomas (1900) attributed a ''sacrosanct'' character to the wagtail based on taboos associated with it (again, one should not kill them) in Languedoc, France and Wettereau, Germany. In Ireland, the wagtail is considered ''the devil's bird'' and there is a popular belief that it is difficult or impossible to injure these animals because they have three drops of the devil's blood (Windle 1894).

Birds and Women: Colors, Environments, and Movements

Binary oppositions are very common in myth analyses (Leach 1977). In the context of the present work, humans, birds and artifacts (e.g., clothes), are in black and white, and bring strongly opposing colors to the fluvial landscape. In Europe in the mid-15th century feminine style abandoned the veil, and thereafter

this article of clothing was only worn by widows and nuns (Santos 2006). In maritime regions of Portugal, women were constantly at risk of losing their husbands at sea and would prepare black mourning clothes ahead of time should they suddenly become widows (Lis 2003). In images in the book *As Lavandeiras: Lendas e Imaxes das Donas do Rio* (*The Laundresses: Legends and Images of the Ladies of the River)* by Cerqueiro (2002), many laundresses in Galicia are shown wearing a veil and black dress, ''mourning clothes,'' often with a white apron covering the chest and stomach area. In the process of washing, many white articles can be seen spread on the rocks or grass, creating a scene in which white clothing contrasts with the widows' dark dresses.

By the mid-18th century, Afro-Brazilian slaves were performing functions such as washing clothes. Rich families often had Afro-Brazilian slaves working as laundresses (Algranti 1988), and cotton was used to manufacture the low-quality, light colored clothes worn by the slaves. At the start of the 19th century and under the cultural influence of Europe, the middle class began to acquire summer houses near rivers and employ black women to wash their clothes (Debret 1978). As such, black women dressed in white clothing also lent the fluvial landscape the contrast of black and white.

The myth of the *lavandeira* birds also presents important cognitive aspects, as it brings with it information about the aquicolous habitat of these animals (Marques 2005b). The *lavandeira* birds (*F. nengeta* and *M. alba*) are generally associated with environments near bodies of water (Carro 1971; Sick 1997), riverbanks, and fountains–the same places where it is common to find laundresses washing their clothes. Additionally, the association made between the *lavandeira* birds and the women in these environments is probably due to the movements that *F. nengeta* and *M. alba* make with their tails and wings (Bouza-Brey 1942; Carro 1971; Cascudo 1999; Farias and Mendes 1994; Mondéjar 1991), revealing yet another example of binary opposition in the variations of the myth: the cultural world (washing clothes) and the natural world (the movements of the birds).

In sum the *lavandeira* birds *F. nengeta* and *M. alba* are predominantly black and white and perform movements with their wings and tails that mimic the movements of women washing clothes (Figures 1B and 1D). These laundresses, widows, or slaves occupied the river banks like the birds and were often dressed in black and white, performing the characteristic movements of washing and beating the clothes. Although the two bird species occupy distant geographical spaces and the laundresses occupied different social contexts, the cognitive schemes were similar because there was a shared association between common elements: colors, environments, and movements. This is reminiscent of an idea expressed by Badcock (1976:69): ''In the mind, the myth is a reflection of nature. In the myth, nature is a reflection of the mind.'' Or, succinctly, the cultural product of a myth is a simplified imitation of a natural phenomenon as it is perceived by the human mind (Leach 1977).

Myths can cross immense geographical spaces, encountering different landscapes, faunas, and floras. It is probable that the *lavandeira* myth came from Europe to Brazil during Iberian colonization and encountered fertile ground for its propagation in the New World. Cultural relations between Brazil and Galicia were strengthened after a great wave of migration that followed upon the

abolition of slavery in 1888 and brought some 5 million foreign born migrants to Brazil. In this mass migration, immigrants from Spain (mainly from the provinces of Galicia and Andalusia) played a major role. The countries of preference for these Spanish immigrants were first Argentina, next Cuba and then Brazil. In total, about 12% of all Spaniards migrating from Spain between 1880–1930 came to Brazil, which obtained approximately 15% of all those coming to America (Klein 1992). It seems that after this human migration from Southwest Europe to Latin America, the *lavandeira* myths assumed different versions as a function of the life styles of two different societies, namely northeastern Brazil and Galicia. Therefore, despite living far from each other, some human populations that are culturally interconnected and have close contact with similar natural resources (aquicolous birds that resemble each other in terms of colors and movements, in this case) may share analogous cognitive schemes.

Conclusions

The *lavandeira* birds *F. nengeta* and *M. alba* share very similar morphological and behavioral aspects that apparently facilitated the ''migration'' of a European myth to South America. This phenomenon reinforces the supposition that geographically distant but culturally interlinked human populations living among similar natural elements demonstrate similar cognitive schemes. These two bird species are associated with mythological visions in Europe and South America that have contributed to their cultural protection through a belief in supernatural forces that determine the rules of interaction between humans and *lavandeira* birds. Consequently, if myths have the role of expressing and codifying beliefs, of safeguarding moral principals, and of providing practical rules for orienting humans (Eliade 2004), the analysis of the *lavandeira* myths represents an appropriate strategy for ethnoecological studies and for ethnoconservation efforts. These myths will aid us in better understanding the existence of species falling under an ideologically motivated protection such as the *lavandeira* birds.

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